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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Charnley stem: Clinical, radiological and survival data after 11–14 years

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KEYWORDS

Hip arthroplasty;
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Summary

Background: The Charnley stem provides good outcome for 10 years, but several studies find deteriorating results thereafter. However, study populations, techniques and data analysis vary widely. We have studied 240 Charnley stems in a homogeneous group of patients providing clinical, radiological and survival data after 11–14 years.

Hypothesis: The clinical and radiological outcome of the Charnley stem is not as good than previously thought.

Patients and methods: Five surgeons implanted 240 femoral stems in a community hospital in Norway using antibiotic impregnated cement and third generation cementing techniques. The Charnley stems were implanted with a Charnley cup in 120 cases and an uncemented hemispherical cup (DuralocTM) in 120 cases. The mean age of the patients was 65.5 years and the mean Body Mass Index (BMI) was 26.8. All patients received low molecular weight heparin and antibiotic prophylaxis. Patients were assessed after 10 years by means of Harris Hip Score (HHS) and radiographic evaluation. Implant survival studies were performed after 11–14 years.

Results: One hundred and fifty-eight patients were available for clinical and radiographic evaluation after 10 years. HHS improved from 48.4 (95% CI: 46.6–50.2) preoperatively to 87.9 (95% CI: 86.6–89.3) after 6 months and 87.6 (95% CI: 85.3–89.8) at 10 years. Thirty-one stems had been revised, the reasons for revision were loosening (21), infection (five), instability (four) and late periprosthetic fracture (one). Forty-one stems had one or more signs of loosening. Stem survival was 83.6% using any revisions as end point, and mean estimated stem survival was 12.7 years (12.2–13.3 years).

Discussion: Other studies report survival at mid-term from 83–96%. Our results are in the low-end. Even though our rate of infection was high (2%), the main cause of the poor results

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is aseptic loosening. We do not know the reason for this high-rate of loosening. As we believe that our technique is adequate and patient population average, we suspect that this rate of loosening is a characteristic of the implant. Results from this prospective cohort study add to the evidence that the Charnley stem should not be used hip arthroplasty unless patient life expectancy is less than 10 years.

Level of evidence: Level 2 prospective clinical study.

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Introduction

Total hip arthroplasty (THA) is an effective treatment for end-stage degenerative disease of the hip joint, and the Charnley low friction arthroplasty has been regarded as a gold standard. Multiple reports document the outcome of the arthroplasty after up to 35 years, but patient populations, techniques and outcome measures vary widely. Generally the outcome of the Charnley arthroplasty has been successful for 10 years, but several studies have reported increasing rates of revision beyond 10 years [1–5]. Nevertheless, the Charnley stem continues to be highly regarded, and is still the stem to which others are compared in the Norwegian arthroplasty register [6]. Registry data provide valuable knowledge, but has been criticized for relying merely on survival data, disregarding clinical and radiographic outcomes.

Some long-term studies report results utilize older cementing techniques [7] or contain heterogeneous patient populations [1]. Also, outcomes data are reported in a variety of ways. A recent report on Charnley arthroplasties found an implant survival rate of 83% at 13 years but only a 76% clinical success rate [8].

We have investigated the outcome as well as survival data of 240 Charnley stems after 10 years implanted at a community hospital in Norway implanted with contemporary cementing techniques and report our results in terms of clinical success and radiographic findings at 10 years as well as implant survival after 11–14 years.

Patients and methods

Patients and surgical methods

Between April 1994 and June 1997, 215 patients treated at one clinic consented to take part in the study. Twenty-five patients consented for both of their hips, resulting in a total of 240 hips enrolled.

Patients were grouped according to the Charnley classification (Table 1) [9]. All surgeries were performed by five surgeons using a direct lateral approach [10] and third generation cementing techniques with vacuum mixing, retrograde filling of the canal, and pressurization prior to insertion of the femoral component [11]. Cement preloaded with gentamycin (Palacos™) and a Charnley stem (DePuy, Leeds, UK) with 22.225-mm head diameter was used in all cases, and a variety of stem shapes were available (Table 2). The acetabular component was a cemented Charnley Ultra High Molecular Weight Polyethylene (UHMWPE) cup (DePuy, Leeds, UK) in 120 cases and a uncemented porous coated

Table 1 Charnley classification including modification of group B.

A	Single joint arthropathy and no significant medical comorbidity	112
B	One other joint in need of an arthroplasty, or an unsuccessful or failing arthroplasty in another joint	118 ^a
B1	Contralateral hip in need of arthroplasty, but untreated	64
B2	Contralateral hip has been successfully treated with an arthroplasty	54
C	Multiple joints in need of arthroplasty, multiple failing arthroplasties or significant medical or psychological impairment	10

^a B1 + B2.

Duraloc 1200™ cup (DePuy, Leeds, UK) in 120 cases. We used randomization by means of closed envelope for allocation of acetabular components.

We used dalteparin (Fragmin®), a low molecular weight heparin, 5000 IE subcutaneously for prophylaxis against thromboembolic events on the night before surgery, 4–8 h

Table 2 Diagnosis, age and type of implants used in the study.

<i>Diagnosis</i>	
Osteoarthritis	187
Congenital hip dysplasia	42
Post-traumatic arthritis	6
Rheumatoid arthritis	4
Avascular necrosis	1
<i>Sex</i>	
Male	64
Female	176
<i>Types of implants</i>	
Flanged 40	115
Roundback 40	30
Long neck	24
Extra heavy long neck	13
Roundback 45	24
Short neck	1
Flanged 45	24
Extra heavy flanged 45	9

Table 3 Harris Hip Score, scales and subscales indicating the points possible for each subscale.

<i>Pain</i>	44
<i>Function</i>	46
Gait (33)	
Limp (11)	
Support (11)	
Distance (11)	
ADL (13)	
Stairs (4)	
Socks (4)	
Sitting (4)	
Transportation (1)	
<i>Range of motion</i>	6
<i>Absence of deformity</i>	4
<i>Total points</i>	100

postoperatively and thereafter daily for the length of the stay, which mean was 8.5 days (2–13 days). Cefuroxim (Zinacef®) was given routinely in the study period for 1 day. Postoperatively we allowed patients restricted weight bearing on the day after surgery and all were encouraged to use two crutches for at least 6 weeks.

In this prospective randomized trial, not all variables of interest were recorded prospectively. For that reason, we undertook a chart review looking for the following parameters: length of stay, details on the use of antibiotics both as a primary prophylaxis and as secondary treatment for postoperative infections, detailed dosage of thromboprophylactic agents. Appearance of an antibiotic in the charts was interpreted as an infection. We were not able to find details on urinary analysis or other hard evidence regarding the etiology of an infection. However, the type of infection was inferred from the type of antibiotic employed.

Methods of assessment

Patients were seen by a physiotherapist at 6 months, 2 years, 5 years, and 10 years after surgery who obtained a Harris Hip Score (HHS) [12] at each visit (Table 3). For this study we computed mean scores with 95% confidence intervals. For the final follow-up we also computed pain scores and functional scores in brackets by 10. Radiographs were obtained at all visits and analyzed by a radiologist not directly involved in the study. Radiographic changes were described according to the femoral zones of Gruen et al. [13]. Changes have been included in the present analysis if recorded as larger than 2 mm, irrespective of length within the zone. In addition to the clinical scores (HHS), radiographic analysis and revision rates at 10 years, we calculated implant survival rates. This was done by performing a survival analysis in August 2008 (11–14 years postoperatively), using August 31st as a censoring date.

Statistical methods

Two-sample *T*-tests were used for comparing continuous data, Chi² tests were used to compare proportional data.

Survival data were analyzed using Kaplan-Meier plots and Cox regression analysis was used looking for possible predictors of failure. *P*-values lower than 0.05 and non-overlapping 95% confidence intervals were regarded as denoting statistically significant differences.

Results

Fifty-eight men and 157 women were enrolled in the study. Demographic information is shown in Tables 3 and 4. For the 10-year follow-up, we were able to assess 158 cases that had both radiographs and HHS. Twenty-six patients were deceased and 25 patients could not attend a clinical and radiographic examination due to advanced age and concomitant illnesses. None of these patients had been revised.

Harris Hip Score

HHS improved from a mean baseline value of 48.4 to 87.9 at the 6-month control (Table 5). There was also a significant improvement from 6 months to 2 years, and a drop from 5 to 10 years. After 10 years, HHS by 10-point brackets indicates that 20 of 158 cases scored lower than 70 points (13%). The lower values of total HHS is composed of a concomitant deterioration of function and increase in pain (Table 6).

Radiographic results

There were one or more signs of loosening in 41 of the 158 cases (26%) available for 10-year follow-up. There was no

Table 4 Age and Body Mass Index (BMI) at surgery.

	Mean	95% Confidence interval for mean	
		Lower bound	Upper bound
Age	65.5	64.6	66.5
BMI	26.8	26.2	27.3

Table 5 Harris Hip Score at baseline and each follow-up including 95% confidence intervals, minimum and maximum values.

	N	Mean	95% Confidence interval for mean		Minimum	Maximum
			Lower bound	Upper bound		
Baseline	240	48.4	46.6	50.2	6	94
Six months	237	87.9	86.6	89.3	41	100
Two years	225	91.3	89.9	92.7	45	100
Five years	191	91.0	89.4	92.7	38	100
Ten years	158	87.6	85.3	89.8	21	100

Table 6 Harris Hip Score (HHS) in brackets by 10 and corresponding pain and function score including 95% confidence intervals.

HHS	N	Pain score			Function score		
		Mean	95% Confidence interval for mean		Mean	95% Confidence interval for mean	
			Lower bound	Upper bound		Lower bound	Upper bound
90–100	91	43.7	43.5	43.9	44.1	43.5	44.6
80–89	38	42.0	40.7	43.3	33.6	32.2	35.0
70–79	9	40.0	34.8	45.2	27.3	22.7	31.9
60–69	11	36.9	31.5	42.4	20.0	13.6	26.4
<60	9	22.0	9.8	34.2	16.3	1.1	31.5
Total	158	41.4	40.3	42.5	37.8	36.2	39.3

association between radiographic signs of loosening and HHS (Table 7), as five of the 20 patients with HHS below 70 had one or more signs of loosening and 36 of 138 with HHS above 70 had signs of loosening. Conversely, of the 117 patients with no signs of loosening, 15 patients had a HHS below 70 (13%).

Revisions

At the time of the last follow-up, 31 hips had been revised (Table 8), 17 in the Charnley group and 14 in the Duraloc group ($P=0.42$; χ^2). Aseptic loosening was the most common reason for revision and this occurred in 21 cases followed by infection (five), instability (four) and one case of periprosthetic fracture.

The five infected hips were treated with two-stage revision after 5, 11, 14, 24 and 48 months, all five occurred in the Charnley group. There was a significant association between secondary use of antibiotics and later infection ($P=0.001$;

χ^2). Only one of the 188 patients who did not have a post-operative urinary tract infection developed a hip infection, whereas four of the 41 patients with postoperative urinary tract infection later became infected. Relative risk for prosthetic infection is 18.3 when a postoperative infection occurred. The patients that became infected were significantly older (71.2 vs. 65.4 years; $P=0.035$; T -test) than the patients that did not become infected.

With aseptic loosening as end-point, implant survival was 88.9% whereas survival with all causes for revision as end-point was 83.6%. The estimated mean survival of femur according to the Kaplan-Meier analysis was 12.7 years (95% confidence interval: 12.2–13.3). In the Cox regression analysis we did not find any variables that predicted stem survival.

Dislocation and other complications

Seventeen patients reported instability, five out of 120 in the Charnley group (3.3%) and 12 out of 120 (10.0%) in the Duraloc group ($P=0.098$; χ^2). There were 33 complications that were not treated surgically, 15 in the Charnley group and 18 in the Duraloc group ($P=0.32$; χ^2).

Table 7 Number of patients with radiological signs of loosening by Harris Hip Score (HHS).

HHS at 10 years	Number of radiological signs of loosening				Total
	0	1	2	3	
90–100	70	7	11	3	91
80–89	26	5	5	2	38
70–79	6	0	2	1	9
60–69	9	0	1	1	11
<60	6	1	1	1	9
Total	117	13	20	8	158

Table 8 Reasons for revision and mean time (range) to revision.

	Number of cases	Years to revision (range)
Aseptic loosening	21	5.7 (1–13)
Infection	5	1.7 (0–4)
Instability	4	2.8 (1–5)
Fracture	1	0.9

In the retrospective chart review, 52 cases (24 in the Charnley group and 28 in the Duraloc group) were identified in which a second course of antibiotics was given, of which 41 cases were given antibiotics indicating a urinary tract infection and 11 cases other antibiotics, indicating a range of infection types.

Discussion

Determining the long-term outcome after THA requires large studies, which are demanding and expensive. For that reason, many studies now originate from arthroplasty registries. Arthroplasty registries are powerful tools that provide insights in the performance of implants in specific regions. Originally designed to identify inferior products, most provide revision rates or survival rates as the only outcome measure. Survival data does not provide any information on the clinical status of the patient and every implant that is unrevised is considered a success. For that reason it is important to supplement reports from arthroplasties with reports which also provide a clinical and radiological outcomes. Moreover, registries depend on reliable reports on revision surgery. Revision surgery is often performed at a different hospital many years later, and failure to report the revision may falsely improve survival data. Also, it is well-known that the composition of the patient populations may vary with regards to gender, age and Body Mass Index (BMI) and preoperative functional level is important in predicting outcomes. Hence, clinical studies are a crucial supplement to arthroplasty registry studies.

Survival of the Charnley arthroplasty was reported to be between 90 and 95% in registries [14,15], and survival in clinical studies has been 85 to 96% [8,16–20] at mid-term (10–15 years). In our study, we found a survival of 84%, which was calculated as the number of surviving implants using the number of implants available at 10 years as the denominator. Using the original number of 240 cases the survival is $240 - 31 / 240 = 87\%$. We do not know the reason for our results in the lower range, but we believe that our technique and patient population is representative in terms of age, gender, BMI and activity level.

In our series, we used conventional cementing techniques aiming for a 2–3 mm cement mantle. However, the optimal cementing technique has not been determined. Good results have been obtained using an extremely thin cement mantle, as well (the French paradox) [21]. Utilizing the Charnley-Kerboull stem with only 25 reoperations in a series of 222 patients under the age of 50 years [22], and in another study the authors found a 15-year survival rate of 88.5% in patients treated for osteonecrosis [23]. In a comparative study the authors found that the polished or satin finish was better than the matte surface [24].

HHS below 70 has been designated as a bad clinical outcome. Forty-four points of the HHS is assigned to pain and the rest is derived from some sort of physical activity. It is well-known that physical activity and patient function deteriorate with time, and HHS is therefore heavily influenced by patient function. For that reason a low HHS may signify a low-level of activity more than unsuccessful arthroplasty beyond 5–7 years. However, in this study it is clear that

the pain and activity scores deteriorate in a parallel fashion, which supports using HHS as a parameter for evaluate long-term outcome.

We found radiological signs compatible with loosening in 43 cases (32%). The mode of failure of the Charnley stem has been described [13] and is usually characterized by a radiolucent line in zone 1 followed by cement fracture around the tip of the stem and increasing radiolucencies in zones 3 to 5. Subsidence and displacement into a varus position ensues and there may be secondary cortical hypertrophy in zone 3. However, the speed with which this process progresses is variable and dependent on the total impact on the prosthesis. The total impact is determined by the weight of the patient and activity level. As the activity level of the patients declines with aging, a prosthesis with radiographic signs of loosening may remain stable and free of pain and not progress to revision. The patient should, however, be followed closely.

The relationship between radiographic findings and clinical outcome is complicated. In the study by Hulleberg et al. [8] 13 of 118 hips had a HHS <70, but among those only six were radiographically loose. Conversely, six of the hips with signs of loosening had a HHS >70, which was defined as clinically successful. In our study, 20 out of 158 hips scored <70 but only five of those had one or more signs of loosening, and none were deemed definitely loose. Beckenbaugh and Ilstrup found that only 8% of loose stems had required revision [25], and Ritter et al. found that 10 of 15 loose stems had been revised [20]. Hartofilakidis et al. revised 11 of 84 hips (13%) due to loosening of femur and acetabulum and another 11 of 52 (21%) femoral components displayed signs of loosening, but were unrevised [26]. The clinical outcome of patients with signs of loosening is often not described. In our study, we did not find any significant association between radiological signs of loosening and clinical outcome, but other authors have noted this association previously [25].

There are limitations to any long-term study of this nature. Because of death and deterioration in general health, only 158 patients were available for clinical and radiographic evaluation at the 10-year mark. While it has been shown that the results in patients lost to follow-up are not as good as patients who stay in clinical studies [27], we were able to determine reason for loss to follow-up for almost all of our patients. The vast majority of those who declined a follow-up visit doing so because of advanced comorbid diseases, and not because of poor function of the hip. In addition, our overall follow-up rate was similar to other long-term studies of hip function, even though our patient population was significantly older [28–30].

The lack of precise recording of comorbidities is also a limiting factor. Indices of comorbidities have previously been shown to predict functional outcome as well as complications after THA [31–37]. Although the Charnley classification is recommended for identifying functional classes [38], it is not a validated comorbidity instrument, and might not be sensitive enough to record subtle nuances in patient health status. Recording level of activity is also important [39,40] as it is of primary interest to the patients for performing recreational activities [41] as well as for improving physical fitness, although increased level of activity correlates with wear and potential failure of an implant [42–44]. The HHS contains assessment of physical function,

but it does not quantify what the patient actually does, only what he or she is capable of doing. Dedicated scales have been developed for the sole purpose of estimating level of activity before and after THA, but these scales were not available for use in this study [44–47].

The issue of bilateral procedures is controversial since the presence of two procedures in one patient violates the assumption of independent observations that many statistical tests rely on [48–50]. However, other authors have discussed this and found that inclusion of bilateral procedures may not alter the results under certain circumstances [8,50]. According to our study protocol, the presence of an arthroplasty in the contralateral hip was not an exclusion criterion. Nor was there any criteria excluding patients with bad function of the contralateral hip that could be presumed to necessitate another hip replacement during the study period. It would also be very hard to find patients with unilateral disease in sufficient numbers to do a long-term study as the other hip is known to need a replacement in at least 15% of the cases [50]. Hence, in our opinion, it was justified to include the patients who had two arthroplasties during the study and treat them as independent cases.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence in support of the poor outcome of the Charnley low friction arthroplasty after 10–14 years, documenting a revision rate of 13%, poor clinical outcome and radiographic signs of loosening in 26% of the cases. We do not recommend this implant for patients with a life expectancy in excess of 10 years, possibly reserving the stem for hemiarthroplasties after hip fracture in the elderly population.

Conflict of interest statement

None.

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